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Justifications and their effects in early adult-child interaction: Developmental trends and individual differences

Veneziano, E.

Université Paris Descartes - CNRS MoDyCo, Paris, France

Summary

Earlier research shows that mothers and children often provide a justification when opposing their partner's intentions, statements or actions. The analysis of 32 hours of videorecording of natural interaction from 4 dyads at 2 time periods (20-22 and 24-27 months) and 18 hours from 18 children interacting with their familiar partners, 6 at 2, 4 and 6 years of age, shows that middle-class mothers justify at a high rate their oppositions independently of the child's age and competence, while children's increase significantly their justifications from T1 to T2 and further at 3-4 yrs. It also shows that justifications of first oppositions generally help preventing open conflicts, a finding that holds for both partners and for 3 out of the four dyads with young children.

Introduction

In conversation, when behaviors and events are considered unexpected for

the interlocutor, it is pragmatically "normative" to account for them by providing a justification (e.g., Heritage, 1990). Indeed, the absence of "accounts" can legitimately bring the interlocutor to ask for an explanation (*ibidem*, p.35). Providing a justification is an integral competence of speakers and children need to learn this component of language use.

Explanations and justifications may play a crucial part in the management of interpersonal relations: They are meant to influence the interlocutor's intentions and beliefs by persuading him/her of the legitimacy of one's viewpoint. From this perspective, the production of justifications provides indications as to the participants' understanding of the partner's mental states as well as crucial information on young children's implicit theory of mind (Veneziano & Sinclair, 1995; Veneziano, 1999, 2001).

Previous studies have shown that very young children, starting between 1;6 and 1;9, can provide justifications of their behavior, particularly of requests and refusals (e.g. Veneziano & Sinclair, 1995; Veneziano, 1999), well before they have acquired specific linguistic means, such as the connective *because*, to express them (e.g., Veneziano, 1999; Veneziano & Sinclair, 1995).

At 1;6, for example, Chantal justifies her request to open a box containing a piece of a puzzle by saying /pe'pa/, sort of equivalent of "peux pas" 'can't', whose function is to provide the reason for the request to open the box. The

request is expressed by gesturing at the mother while stretching out the box while its justification is expressed by the verbalization of the child's incapacity to carry out the action herself.

This paper analyzes this capacity in oppositional episodes where contrasts of intentions or opinions between children and their interlocutors arise. These episodes, occurring naturally in everyday interaction from early on, are particularly interesting because the “public” contrast needs to be managed and children draw upon their resources to restore interactional equilibrium (Eisenberg & Garvey, 1981). That is where justifications might intervene as an adaptive strategy to redirect the relationship and/or to have one's point of view accepted more easily by the other.

Earlier research indeed shows that mothers and children justify their refusals, denials and protests and that justifications reduce the probability of an open conflict (e.g., Eisenberg & Garvey, 1981; Tesla & Dunn, 1992; Shatz, 1994). This has been shown to be the case also in a few studies of children under 2 years (e.g., Veneziano, 1999, 2001; Veneziano & Sinclair, 1995).

This study has three specific aims: 1. to investigate whether the mothers'/caregivers' justifying attitude depends on children's age and whether it shows individual differences in middle-class families; 2. to investigate whether children's justifications present developmental trends

and individual differences, at a given developmental level and 3. to investigate developmentally and differentially the effect of justifications on the nature of the following interaction. Are there individual differences in the dyads' communicative profiles in this domain?

Material and Methods

Four children, two boys and two girls, were observed at home during natural interaction with their familiar caregivers at two age periods: at T1 when the children were 20-22 months old, and T2, when they were 24 to 27 months old. At each time period, 4 hours of videorecording per dyad were analyzed. An additional 6 dyads were observed at each of 3 age periods: 2, 4 and 6 years. One hour of videorecorded natural interaction per child was analyzed. In total, the data represent 50 hours of videorecorded natural interaction (32 hours from the younger children and 18 from the children at the 3 ages levels).

Results

Figure 1 shows the proportion of justifications of first oppositional moves at the different age periods, for the mothers and for the children. Figure 1a concerns the younger children and figure 1b the children aged 2, 4 and 6 years. Figure 2 provides individual results for the 4 young dyads at T1 (20-22 months) and at T2 (24-27 months), figure 2a for the children, and figure 2b for the mothers. At all ages, mothers justify more than their children and

the proportion of oppositions justified doesn't change with the age of the children. With one exception, children increase the proportion of their justifications up to 4 years while no noticeable change is observed afterwards.

The comparative analysis of what happens after the first oppositional moves as a function of the presence or absence of justifications in them, is presented in figure 3, for oppositions initiated by the mothers, and in figure 4, for oppositions produced by the children. The data are presented per dyad at T1 and T2, and shows the proportion of first oppositional moves that are followed by the insistence of the partner according to whether the opposition is justified (on the left hand side) or not (on the right hand side). Figure 5 presents the same data for the 2, 4 and 6 years old groups, figure 5a for the oppositions of the partners and figure 5b for the oppositions of the children. The effect of the young children's justifications on the mother is significant for 3 of the four dyads at both time periods. It is also quite significant for the 2, 4 and 6 yrs old groups. A very similar pattern is found concerning the effect of mothers' justifications on the children's immediate response. The proportion of insistence on the child's side after justified oppositions is significantly lower than the proportion of insistence after unjustified oppositions for 3 out of the 4 dyads at both time periods. It is also quite significant for the 2, 4 and 6 yrs old. The dyad GAE has a

different profile. First the proportion of insistence in general, by the child as well as by the mother, is quite lower than that of the other dyads and the justification doesn't lower it significantly further. Except at T1 where there is a non significant tendency for the mother to insist more when the child justifies his oppositions than when he doesn't, in all the other cases (at T2 for the child's justifications, and at T1 and T2 for the mother's) the tendency goes in the expected direction.

Conclusions

Children and mothers produce their justifications with little solicitation from the partner and for the most part in their first oppositional move, as an anticipatory move to prevent the partner's insistence. The production of justifications on the children's part should be seen as part of a larger change in pragmatic functioning related to their emerging implicit knowledge about the mind of others (implicit ToM). Partners become *alter* persons having, like the children, internal states — intentional, emotional and mental — that may be different from their own and that need to be taken into account for attaining one's goals. Within this framework, language comes to be seen as an appropriate means to let the partner access the child's internal states and to understand those of the partner.

Taking into account different sources of data, it can be stated that there is a period when children do not provide any justification of their oppositions

(Veneziano, 1999) followed by a period when children start justifying. All of the children studied so far justify SOME of their oppositional moves at T1 (at the 20-22 months period). Three out of the 4 young children studied increase the proportion of justifications from T1 to T2. Mothers justify at a higher rate all the time and do not show changes in this behavior as the child becomes more competent. Mothers justify at a higher rate than the children but the difference is no more significant in the 4 and 6 yrs old groups. Both mothers' and children's justifications help preventing an overt conflict. Except for one dyad (whose proportion of insistence is lower no matter whether the opposition is justified or not), for all the other dyads mothers and children tend to insist less when the partner's refusal, denial or protest is justified than when it is not. These coherent results reveal however some individual differences in the interactional profiles of the dyads. Whereas in all cases mothers justify more than their children, confronted with the opposition of the partner, the tendency to insist on one's original position varies: it can be higher or lower, similar or dissimilar between one partner and the other. Future work should focus on describing these different interactional profiles and on studying the dynamic of the interaction in greater detail, in particular, the cases of insistence in which arguments are followed by counterarguments. In such cases, the insistence doesn't signal negligence of the other's point of view but, on the contrary, an effort to take

it into account by finding appropriate arguments to overcome it.

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Figure captions

Figure 1 - Proportion of justified first oppositions:

1a - At T1 and T2 for children and mothers ; 1b - Children and partners at 3 ages.

Figure 2 - Proportion of justified first oppositions - Individual dyads' result:

2a - Children's justifications; 2b - Partners' justifications

Figure 3 - Effect of mothers' justifications on the children

Figure 4 - Effect of children's justifications on the mother

Figure 5 - Effect of justifications on the partner for 3 age group; 2, 4 and 6

years old : 5a - % of CHILD's insistence after the partner's justifications; 5b - % of PARTNER's insistence the child's justifications

Figure 1 Proportion of Justified first oppositions
 Figure 1a at T1 and T2, by children and by mothers
 Figure 1b by Children and Partners at 3 ages (6 dyads per age level)

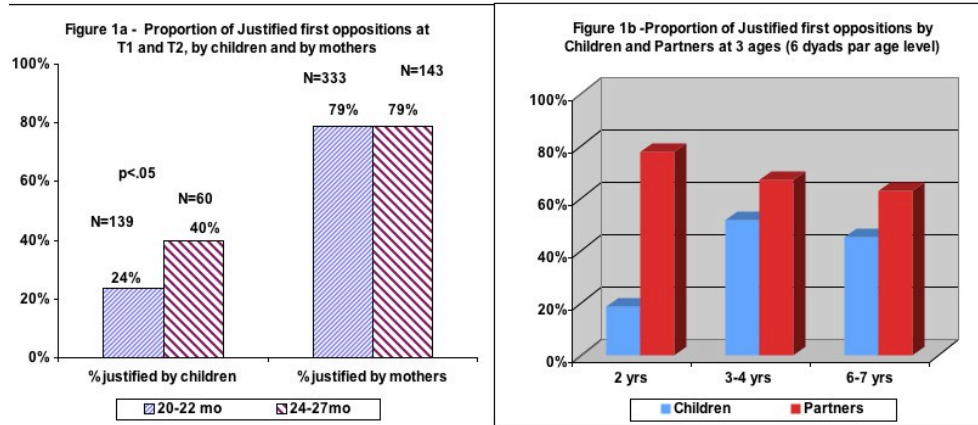


Figure 2
Proportion of Justified 1st oppositions at T1 and T2: individual dyads' results - Girls: CA, MA; Boys: GE, AN
Figure 2a: Childre's justifications Figure 2b: Mothers' justifications

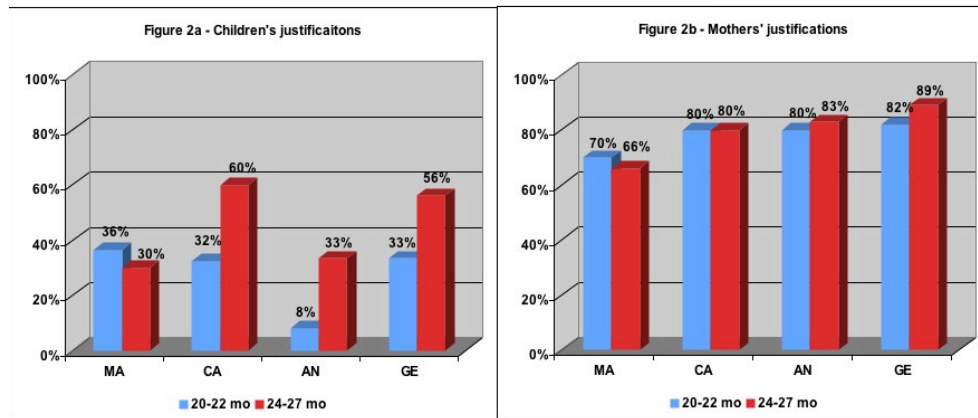


Figure 3 - Effect of MOTHERS' justifications on the CHILDREN
 % of CHILD's INSISTENCE after justified and non justified oppositions of the MOTHER
 MA CA AN GE at T1 (20-22 months) and T2 (24-27)

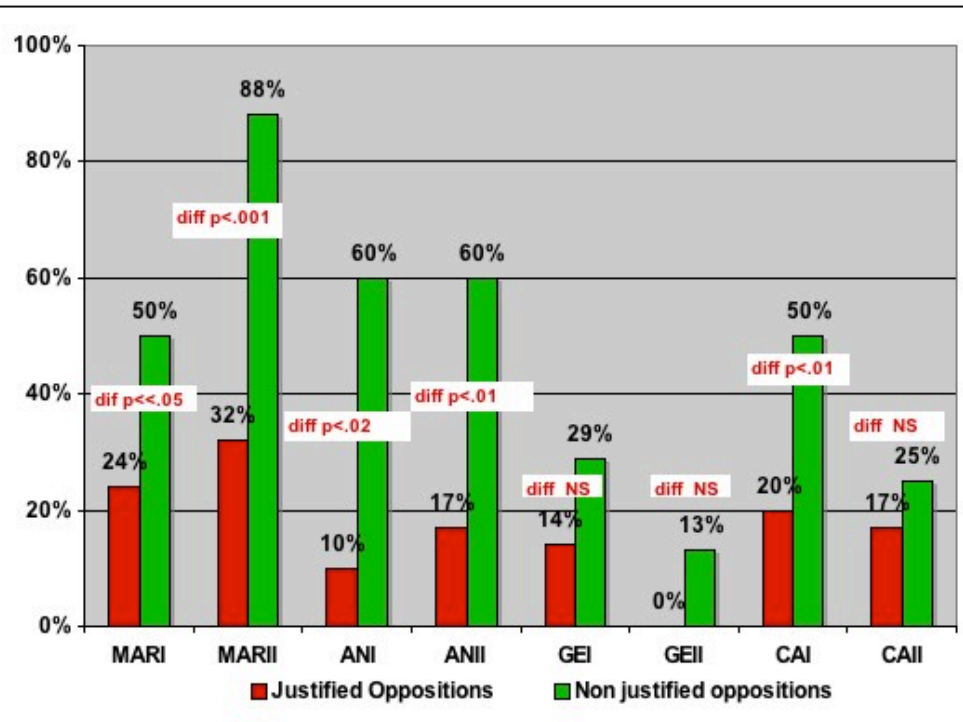


Figure 4 - Effect of CHILDRENS' justifications on the MOTHERS
 % of MOTHER's INSISTENCE after justified and non justified oppositions of the CHILD
 MA CA AN GE at T1 (20-22 months) and T2 (24-27)

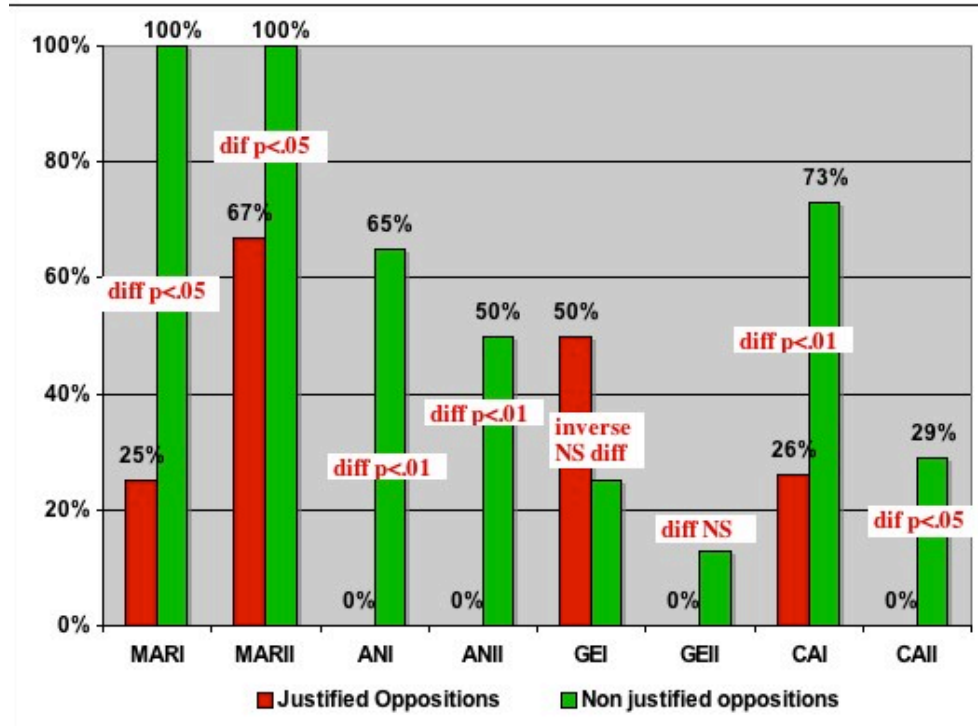


Figure 5 - Effect of justifications on the partner for 3 age groups; 2, 4 and 6 yrs old

Figure 5a - % of CHILD's INSISTENCE after justified and non justified oppositions of the PARTNER

Figure 5b - % of PARTNER's INSISTENCE after justified and non justified oppositions of the CHILD

Figure 5a

Figure 5b

